

How reform-friendly is Phoenix?

CATEGORY	HUMAN CAPITAL	FINANCIAL CAPITAL	CHARTER ENVIRONMENT	QUALITY CONTROL	DISTRICT ENVIRONMENT	MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENT
Rank	N/A	N/A	4 of 24	N/A	N/A	N/A

Overview

Which American cities are most hospitable to education reform, especially the “entrepreneurial” kind? To answer this question for Phoenix and other cities examined in this study, we used publicly available data, national and local surveys, and interviews conducted with on-the-ground insiders. Respondents provided information about the city environment as a whole as well as Mesa Public Schools.¹ Judgments based upon these data, however, are the responsibility of the authors. Note, too, that due to the study’s timing, any major policy changes that cities (or states) may have made in connection with the *Race to the Top* competition are not captured in these rankings (but see sidebar for partial update).

Background

This analysis of Phoenix was severely limited by a 0 percent response rate on the national stakeholder survey and a low response rate on the local stakeholder survey. The dearth of resulting data yielded too few indicators to calculate a final grade or ranking for most areas (see Appendix A for Methodology). Still, we include here information from the local responses that we did receive, as well as publicly available data and interviews.

Race to the Top Update: Arizona—Phoenix

Arizona applied for round 1 of Race to the Top and was not chosen as a finalist. The state reapplied for round 2 and was named a finalist. Before round 2, Arizona passed a number of education-related reforms that: create a task force to craft accountability and assessment measures for Kindergarten through third grade; develop a grade-based ranking system for schools; provide for creation of an alternative high school diploma; establish competency requirements for promotion of third grade; and establish teacher and principal evaluation based 33-50 percent on student achievement.

Local respondents and interviewees paint a rosy picture of Phoenix as a hotspot for nontraditional initiatives. They suggest that a pro-reform district, a weak teachers’ union, and a thriving community of business, philanthropy, and advocacy organizations together create an environment conducive to reforming schools in the Phoenix area. Without a national perspective, however, it is difficult to tease out a balanced view of the city.

Snapshot

Phoenix is home to a moderate supply of talented **human capital**. It contains a handful of alternative certification programs, such as Teach For America—which has operated there since 1994—and The

1. This profile provides a snapshot of the data collected for Phoenix, Arizona, in fall 2009. For the full data, see http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_america-best-and-worst-cities-for-school-reform.

New Teacher Project (Phoenix Teaching Fellows). But recruiting to the Phoenix metro area can be tricky, and once there, unconventional talent is largely barred from permeating Mesa Public Schools (MPS). Inefficient district hiring routines and slow HR cycles, in addition to a “last hired, first fired” layoff policy, deter fresh talent from the MPS classroom.

Why Mesa Public Schools?

The Phoenix metropolitan area contains multiple municipalities and more than fifty autonomous school districts: at least twenty-six “elementary” districts, nine “high school” districts, and others that combine various grade levels. (The state also directly authorizes many local charter schools.) The complex manner in which municipal and school-district boundaries intersect—or don’t—is mostly a mystery, even to many who live there. Thus, education governance in Phoenix is a blur and no *one* entity is in charge of the public schools. Choosing a “primary” school district in Phoenix, then, is a daunting challenge. In the end, the authors settled on Mesa Public Schools; with almost 70,000 pupils, it is the largest district in the Phoenix metropolitan area as well as in the state. The selection of Mesa—which is both suburban and urban in demographics and culture—is an imperfect choice for evaluating district-level reform in the Valley of the Sun, but given the fractured structure of public education in the Phoenix area, no district emerged as the flagship.

Phoenix’s lack of available public-sector **financial capital** is masked by generous private funding channels. MPS, for instance, spends less per student in inflation-adjusted dollars than almost any other school district in this report. But private sources help to fill the void: Philanthropies, businesses, and advocacy organizations collaboratively invest in education—but those investments are not, of course, all channeled to entrepreneurial reforms.

Phoenix’s **charter environment** is sizable and adequately supported. Arizona sets no limit on the number of charter schools that can exist—good for entrepreneurs looking to set up shop—but it does not maintain adequate authorizer oversight or equitably fund charter schools.² Arizona

grants a longer charter than almost any other state, which allows unsuccessful schools—of which there are many in Phoenix—to stay in business. Fortunately, other entities stress quality: The Arizona Charter School Association and other local support organizations emphasize performance and seek to improve low-performing charters.

Data in this analysis that speak to **quality control** in Phoenix are scarce, but it is clear that the metro area—and state—could do more to measure quality and use data to drive reform. Arizona collects student-level data on demographics, enrollment, longitudinal test scores, and graduation rates, but it does not match student data to teachers or collect transcript and college-readiness data, nor does it raise awareness of the data that it collects to drive change on the ground.³ At the local level, MPS does use its data to drive reform, but only to a small degree.

The **district environment** in MPS is open to reform. MPS leaders generally communicate a sense of urgency and in November 2009 secured, in conjunction with Mesa Community College, a \$250,000

2. For more information, see: *How State Charter Laws Rank Against the New Model Public Charter School Law* (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010).

3. For more information, see: *2009-10 Survey Results Compendium—10 Elements and 10 Actions* (Washington, D.C.: Data Quality Campaign, 2010), http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Elements_Compendium.pdf and http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Actions_Compendium.pdf.

planning grant from the Gates Foundation to develop an education-reform strategy in collaboration with the broader community. The local teachers' union does not play a key role in MPS; as a right-to-work state, the union wields less power than in other locales and alone cannot block or weaken reforms.

Phoenix's **municipal environment** is a mixed bag when it comes to education reform. The philanthropic and business communities are supportive of alternative certification, charter schools, and performance-based pay. Intense collaboration over reform efforts have resulted in a proliferation of organizations such as Expect More Arizona, Beat the Odds Institute, and Stand for Children-Arizona—some of which are more reform-friendly than others. Still, political bickering can retard reform initiatives in Phoenix and the state at large. The state superintendent of public instruction is an elected position, and partisan gridlock can hinder reform if the superintendent and governor hail from different parties.

Bottom Line

Entrepreneurs will find support for nontraditional reforms within both the private and public sectors, a vibrant Phoenix metro area, scads of charter schools, and lots of recent reform activity. But they must be willing to counter potential roadblocks within MPS, partisan politics, and a fragmented school-governance apparatus that makes it hard to effect large-scale change.

Our Categories

Human Capital. Entrepreneurs must have access to a steady flow of talented individuals, whether to staff the organization's central office or to fill the district's classrooms. This component evaluates an entrepreneur's ability to find talent in the city and/or recruit talent to move there. We examined such factors as the alternative certification routes for aspiring teachers, district human resource policies for teachers and central office staff, and the restrictiveness of the local collective bargaining agreement as it pertains to tenure and differentiated pay, among other areas.

Financial Capital. A pipeline of readily accessible funding from private and public sources is particularly important for nonprofit organizations trying to break into a new market or scale up their operations. This component tests whether, and how much, national and local philanthropic organizations give to nontraditional providers in each city, as well as the local availability of dollars from public sources. Though education reformers often tout the importance of quality over quantity, from the perspective of an entrepreneur, free-flowing dollars are an asset.

Charter Environment. Charters are one of the main ways in which entrepreneurs can enter new education markets, both as providers of instruction and services and as consumers of other nontraditional goods and services. We evaluated both the current market share of charters in each city—under the assumption that, once a path has been blazed by others, it is easier for new providers to follow it—as well as the various legal and policy hurdles faced by current or potential charter operators. More formal barriers often occur on the state level (e.g., charter laws) so, where appropriate, we incorporated state-level metrics into city grades.

Quality Control. Lest we unduly credit innovation for its own sake, the study takes into account the quality-control metrics that guide and regulate entrepreneurial ventures in our cities. These may take the form of official regulations and practices, such as the quality of the state achievement test (again, we extrapolate state grades for our cities), or more informal

guides, such as support organizations for nontraditional providers that also keep an eye on quality, such as private groups that help entrepreneurs to navigate district rules and policies.

District Environment. Since many nontraditional providers must contract or otherwise work with the district to do business in the city, finding a district that is both open to nontraditional reforms and has the organizational capacity to handle dealings with such operators in a speedy and professional manner can make or break an entrepreneur's forays into a new market. We considered formal barriers, such as the power of the local teachers' union over district decisions, as well as informal ones, such as whether district leaders were audible voices for reform.

Municipal Environment. Beyond the school district is also the question of general municipal openness to nontraditional education providers. This amorphous sphere includes such entities as the local business community, newspaper editorial boards, and the city government. Having these folks on the side of reform, even if they are not the ultimate consumer of entrepreneurs' wares, can be a powerful asset.